Notes on Trick Solo Playing on the Banjo

By G. A. Keeler

To

All the noble band of

Fretted Instrument Players

(to whom it is dedicated)

this little Booklet wishes

Health, Prosperity and Harmony ;

and

to all Banjoists, particularly those of the

London B.M.G. Club

and the

Hackney and District B.M.G. Club,

it wishes

much edification at the

perusal of these

random notes.

With the Compliments of

Mr. and Mrs. G. A. Keeler.

NOTES ON TRICK SOLO PLAYING ON THE BANJO.

Introductory.

All schoolmasters of experience know that in essay writing, there is a difference often distinguishable between the pupil who has something to say and the pupil who has to say something. In the same way there is frequently a difference discernible between the soloist who has something to play and the soloist who has to play something.

Somewhat similarly we can observe that virtuosity is displayed, not always by a small but by a large repertoire. Yet even the versatile soloist is uncertain now and again to decide what to play to a given audience. To an audience composed entirely of, say, banjo enthusiasts, a banjo composition involving the adroit manipulation of known difficult passages, or unusual effects in a banjo composition, is certain to make a more or less favourable appeal, but to a non-banjo audience, or an audience, at any rate, not particularly interested in technical difficulties in banjo playing, solos or selections of a different category have not infrequently been brought into prominence, in the same way as violinists, on occasion, play trick solos on the violin, using long clay pipes ("churchwardens") or pieces of folded paper for the bow, playing the instrument *on* the bow, instead of the correct way, and so forth.

Most musicians have encountered, sooner or later, the class of person who knows only two tunes—the National Anthem and one that isn't—persons who realise the difference simply because the one makes people stand up and the other does not!

Even Gladstone, the great Liberal statesman, relaxed in his leisure moments and used to entertain friends with simple, comic songs. Lord Malmesbury notes in his Diary on 24th July, 1860:

"Gladstone is quite enthusiastic about negro melodies, singing them with the greatest spirit and enjoyment, never leaving out a verse, and evidently preferring 'Camp Town Races' and such like." (*Punch*, at the time, published a cartoon of the great statesman in which he was depicted holding an axe, as one holds a banjo, and ostensibly playing on it—a witty adaptation of Gladstone's two hobbies—tree felling and singing banjo songs). I instance this merely as showing how even an otherwise sedate statesman can have his merry and carefree moods.

The comic "business" of nigger minstrel artists was a feature years ago at all minstrel troupe entertainments. Doubtless many who read these notes will remember the nigger minstrel who used to seat himself with his banjo (after some preliminary comic business, such as dusting the floor with a bandanna handkerchief, in order to place his hat thereon and subsequently kicking the hat off the stage because of an imaginary noise proceeding from it), and on getting his banjo into position a finger of his left hand would, to all appearances, involuntarily start snapping the first string at the first fret, whereupon the performer would look enquiringly all over the stage to discover the source of the noise, and finally run the noise to earth at the banjo nut, when he would clap his right hand on it, but, simultaneously, his left knee would commence an exaggerated "wobble" or shake. On using the

right hand to stop the "wobble" the left hand would recommence the snapping. This comic business was alternated a few times and the performer finally solved the dilemma by crossing the left leg with the right and then proceeding with his solo.

The device of "trick playing" *pur et simple* was sometimes resorted to not exactly because of the musical make-up, or lack of it, of the audience, but because the venue—the type of hall, etc.—influenced the decision what to play. The late Franco Piper, who was, perhaps, the most noted of the trick playing and juggling banjoists, was impelled to adopt trick playing because he found, long before the invention of the electric banjo, when touring in out-of-the-way towns, etc., in South Africa, or elsewhere, the acoustic properties of the local entertainment centres, in some cases merely a tent, were not good enough for straight playing. No doubt many will recall Piper's juggling and spinning performances and how his "act" involved the use of specially made banjos, some of which were thrown backwards and forwards to a partner, like so many Indian clubs, whilst being adroitly played.

Trick playing, looked at as a whole, embodies a certain amount of suggestion.

Says a writer on "Sound," "the suggestion of objects and events, the awakening in the mind of definite concrete images, may take place in two ways. First, the actual sounds and motion of the music may perceptibly resemble actual sounds and motions of other things. If we look down any list of titles of musical pieces, we are certain to find examples of this. Brooks, cascades, storms, bells, hammers, rides, gondolas, sources of sounds, and moving things of all sorts are laid under contribution. This kind of direct resemblance, aided greatly, of course, by actual association, has a place in dances and marches; and amid the variety of sounds and objects which these words might suggest, the mind should be easily led more or less to define the image either by the pervading character of the music or by certain special points in it. Thus, of two dance pieces, one might be appropriated to nymphs and the other to giants, but by flowing grace in the one case, and by more emphatic phrases and perhaps bass effects, like heavy steps in the other: and we can easily realise the quaintness of turn or the solemn advance which would indicate a marionette or a hero as the subject of a funeral march."

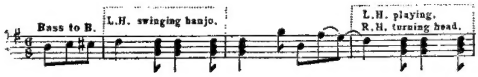
In banjo music we can find solos with such titles as "Wave Crest Galop," "Coontown Breezes," "Funeral March of a Coon," "Sleigh Ride," "Beat o' the Drum," "A Mexican Ride," "A Darkey Chuckle," "Regimental Quickstep," "Sea Breeze," etc., all more or less suggestive as regards various sounds.

From the very earliest times the student of banjo history can find instances of "trick playing" being adopted in order to provide variation and amusement in style of playing for those listeners requiring no great "depth" in their music.

WHAT IS TRICK PLAYING?

What is "trick playing"? It is always difficult to frame definitions, but trick playing on musical instruments may be defined as "the unusual, eccentric, or unorthodox method of presenting musical movements, passages, or phrases, or the production of out-of-the-way effects, not merely to 'catch the ear,' but also the eye." This definition may fall short of being ideal, but it may serve our present purpose.

The earliest instance of a trick banjo solo, so far as I can discover, is that given in "Spratt's Harmonist," published somewhere about the 1870's. In No. 1 of the series (there were several numbers published) Spratt gives the "Magic Trick Solo":—



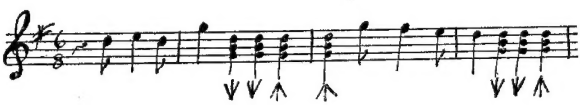
of which I reproduce a few bars. Other printed directions were "R.H. turns head backward and forward, L.H. playing"; "L.H. swing, and R.H. catches in the middle and turns"; "L.H. swing banjo, making it go around and over hand. R.H. catches"; and "L.H. swings banjo backward. R.H. catches."

Not much is known of Spratt as a banjo player, but as a teacher, composer, and maker of banjos he deserves notice. It transpires that, in addition to writing a fair amount of the banjo music current in those days, he also wrote the music for some of Bob Johnson's songs. (Johnson was a well-known nigger minstrel.)

I happen to have a banjo made by Spratt. The head and rim are very wide, and although the instrument is light in weight for its size it would not be an easy instrument to use in the style of trick playing indicated. Spratt later, however, made better models. One banjo was made by him for H.R.H. Prince Albert Victor (who died all too young), and from what I can gather from an illustration this six-stringed banjo, described as "Spratt's Patent Nickel Silver" banjo, was certainly handier to manipulate in the trick playing indulged in in those early days. Trick playing, it may be noted, then generally took the form of simply swinging the instrument whilst playing a simple melody—a form of playing of only very limited application. The swinging or turning of the banjo was done in between phrases or during pauses.

H. J. Ellis, in his "Thorough School for the Five-string Banjo," gives an example in the solo entitled "The Bells," where he directs that "The last two lines are played while swinging the banjo. Hold the instrument in the left hand in the usual manner, having the fingers free to stop the strings which are pulled by the right hand just below the left."

A "trick solo" of this "swing and turn" description was arranged for the six-string banjo about the 1890's by W. E. Ballantine. I reproduce here the first four bars:—



and he gave the following explanation: "The chords marked thus ⋁ are to be pulled near the nut, with the 2nd finger of the left hand; immediately after pulling these two chords, turn the banjo once round, allowing the tailpiece end to turn

in the palm of the right hand, keeping the left hand at the nut, and bringing the instrument to its original position, then strike the two chords marked thus ⋀ with the thumb of the right hand."

Miss Doris Courtney is an adept at this style of trick playing.

PLAYING ON TWO OR MORE INSTRUMENTS SIMULTANEOUSLY.

Ellis wrote a set of "Eight Eccentricities" in which ambidexterity in regard to playing two instruments, more or less simultaneously, is illustrated, a march being played on the banjo whilst a modified form of accompaniment is "worked in," as it were, on the piano by the performer's left hand.

Another example by Ellis, and in my opinion a better one, was a jig, as both instruments are doing more work together, that is, there is less mere alternation from one instrument to the other.

In his "Washington March" Ellis directs that the Bass String of the five-string banjo be raised to D. The following explanation is then given :—

> "Sit at the piano with the banjo and play the March in the ordinary manner, introducing the pianoforte accompaniment with the left hand while pulling the banjo strings with the right."

John M. Turner, in the early 80's a noted American banjoist, apparently used *three* banjos simultaneously, as witness the following extracts :—

London *Era*, 25th Nov., 1882.

"The very finest banjo playing we have ever listened to was supplied by Mr. J. M. Turner, who gave the famous and always welcome 'Turkish Patrol,' and who *contrived to play upon three banjos at one time.*"

London *Morning Advertiser*, 22nd Nov., 1882.

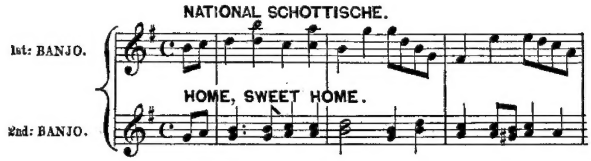
"Then followed a brilliant performance by Mr. J. M. Turner, the distinguished American banjoist, who, commencing with the 'Turkish Reveille' and other airs on one instrument, proceeded to others, in which he played on two, and finally three, banjos."

A little effort of my own by way of trick playing requires the use of two banjos and a piano, the banjos being specially tuned, and the piano (preferably a grand or baby grand) having a sheet of tissue paper interspersed between the piano wires and the hammers, whereby an effect is obtained somewhat comparable to a third banjo!

Another form of eccentricity that ought to be mentioned is what I call the duo-melodic, that is to say the playing of a solo by two players using only one banjo between them, the *modus operandi* being for player A to be seated holding the banjo in the usual way and doing the necessary left-hand fingering, whilst player B stands behind him and does the actual picking of the strings with his (player B's) right hand, so as to produce the tune. I have heard "Bonnie Scotland" played in this way by two well-known members of the former Ilford B.M.G. Club, and another composition (I forget the title) was

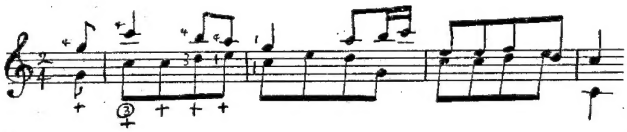
recently played in this style (two players using the one banjo) by a couple of members of the Hackney B.M.G. Club.

A variant that deserves notice is the type of duet whereby the second melody, as played by the second banjoist, is not only a melody complete in itself but also forms an accompaniment to the leading tune.



A solo that deserves more than passing notice, although not exactly, perhaps, a trick solo, is A. H. N. Kennedy's "Silver Threads Among the Gold," where the banjoist has to read from two complete clefs (first and second banjo parts on the one instrument, just as pianists read two clefs). The solo was reproduced in the Christmas number of B.M.G. for 1907.

Another trick solo, and a difficult one to perform, is that given by Zarh Myron Bickford in his "Banjo Players Favourite for Banjo in C Notation." In this solo the player has to "work in," that is, "blend" the two melodies together so as to make one tune.



SOME SPECIAL EFFECTS.

An early instance I recall of what may be termed special effects, i.e. imitations of sundry noises such as lifts, trains, etc., was one introduced many years ago by a player surnamed "Dunville" (known in those days as the "Corney Grain of the banjo"). In his performance he cleverly imitated the noise made by the lifts originally installed on the then quite new "Tuppenny Tube," a girl running downstairs, etc. Curiously enough the idea of the lift noise was utilised by an orchestra that broadcast in November, 1939, each movement of the music being preceded by an ascending chromatic scale passage that purported to represent the lift going up to successive floors. The top floor was the toy department, enabling the orchestra to bring in and conclude with imitations of children's toy musical instruments—an example of orchestral trick playing.

A modern instance of departures from normal playing is Ken Harvey's imitation of a railway engine steaming along at speed after a laborious "start off" from the railway station, but whereas most, if not all, of the trick solo playing is ordinarily done by "finger stylists," this train imitation involves the use of a plectrum.

Eddie Peabody, and Morgan and Hadley have also introduced similar playing in their repertoires.

Imitated Sound of Horse's Hooves.

The effect of the sound of a galloping horse's hooves on the highway as made by the animal gradually approaching, passing by and receding in the distance, can be done more or less realistically by *lightly* muting all the banjo strings at the 12th fret and letting the R.H. pull the 3rd, 2nd and 1st strings in the appropriate time and degree of loudness. An example of the time or rhythm can be seen in Morley's "Circus Parade."

Clock Effects.

Described as "the last word in banjo solos," the composition entitled "The Clock and the Banjo," by Harry F. Reser, calls for special mention. This composition, written for tenor banjoists, dates back to 1896 and was copyrighted by the composer at New York.

In the introduction to this solo what is known as the "tick tock" of a clock is imitated by striking the G and C strings at the back of the bridge (i.e., between the bridge and tailpiece).

The next movement is played by holding the string for the desired note with the first finger and pulling or plucking the string so fingered with the fourth finger of the left hand. The right hand keeps the tick tock going *a tempo*. In the succeeding movement the imitation of the "tick tock" is discontinued and normal manipulation is resumed. At the first *codetta* there are three solo chimes, produced by harmonics on the bass string at the 12th fret. The tick tock is resumed in the next movement, a gradual *retard* being made and a final stop. Winding up the clock is next imitated by muting all the strings with the left hand and drawing the fingers over the muted strings. The brothers Cliff and Geoff Sisley used to feature a "clock solo" of this description on ordinary banjos, which was very well done.

Imitations of Other Instruments.

It is quite likely that as *scordatura* (i.e., an intentional departure from normal tuning to secure special effects) was in very ancient use, the type of banjo solo (trick solo) in which the strings are tuned differently from the usual setting, was also early introduced. Such solos might necessitate a single string being altered, or all of them. Miss Alice Walkenshaw, a well-known player of former days, once, in the 90's, played a solo at a St. James's Hall Festival in which the second string of her banjo was tuned to B-flat. The solo, in all other respects, was the ordinary straight playing.

An example by H. J. Ellis—a *Fandango*—requires all the strings to be tuned abnormally, the unusual tuning being an attempt to imitate the guitar. A similar "attempt" to imitate the Spanish guitar was made by muting all the strings by placing the back of the fourth (the little) finger of the right hand firmly down on the strings immediately over the bridge. Owing to the cramped position of the fourth finger Morley preferred, in certain solos, to place an ordinary wine-bottle cork between the perch and vellum of his banjo. Mechanical muting apparatus can, of course, produce the same effect.

Ellis wrote a "Trick Jig" which he prefaced by saying: "A comical effect is produced by imitating the grinding of an organ with the R.H. just below the tailpiece, while playing the vibration passages with the left." The first three vibration passages are as follow:—

but I think it will be conceded, after trial, that it requires an ultra-responsive banjo to produce much of an effect this way.

An imitation of the bagpipes was a very old-time and popular trick in which the lowering of the bass string (an application of *scordatura*) was used. J. M. Turner gave a version of this particular solo in his "Scientific American Banjo Instructor" (in the so-called "American Notation"). In this work he headed the selection "Bagpipe Imitation" and put a note "Tune Bass down to E," as, of course, he was writing in the aforesaid American notation. This lowering of the string, however, made it very slack, so the player was told: "If the 4th string is too slack when tuned to E, tune all up about two tones." (See also "Eight Banjo Eccentricities," by H. J. Ellis.)

Bugle Effect.

In Ellis's works we sometimes find the bugle imitated by passages or notes in harmonics, as in his "Fusilier (Grand Patrol) March," etc.

Distance Effects, Echoes, Etc.

As regards "distance effects," Mr. Ll. S. Lloyd, C.B., M.A. (Cantab), in writing on "Decibels and Phons" in relation to the measurement of sounds and noises and explaining to his readers how to calculate the drop in loudness which occurs as we move away from a sound, or the sound from us, says: "Suppose our sound to be made in an open space, to avoid echoes, by a whistle with a note at the top of the treble clef. At first, let us stand 10 feet away from the whistle. Let us then move to a distance of 30 feet. If we imagine rays of sound, like rays of light, it is evident that the sound which falls on a square a yard deep and a yard across, when we are 10 feet away, would fall on a square 3 yards deep and 3 yards across, when we are 30 feet

away. That is, the sound will then fall on an area of 9 square yards; each square yard will receive one-ninth of the sound which fell on the square yard 10 feet from the whistle. When we are 30 feet from the whistle our ears will receive one-ninth of the sound they receive when we are only 10 feet from the whistle. The energy falling on our ears is reduced in the ratio 1:9. This ratio is the same as the ratio between the rate of vibration of the fundamental and that of the ninth note of the harmonic series. The musical interval between these notes is 3 octaves and a whole tone, an interval containing about 9½ major thirds. The fall in loudness is therefore 9 or, say, 10 phons." The banjoist, in imitating the sound of the horse's hooves, has, of course, to modulate the strength of the picking of the strings according as he wishes to convey the impression of nearness or otherwise.

That versatile pair, Mays and Hunter, on occasion did not disdain to resort to "trick playing." Some at least who read these lines will remember Parke Hunter's interlude of the church service, where he gave (1) an imitation of the bells; (2) imitation of a short selection on the church organ (chord tremolo); and (3) what he described as "a still shorter sermon by the parson," where, by adroitly manipulating up and down the bass string of his banjo he parodied the intoning and final Amen of a cleric in church. The manipulation of the bass string is, of course, best done with a banjo having a *peg* head.

Not exactly "trick playing," but spectacular in a small way, was Mays and Hunter's turn where Hunter played a selection of international melodies whilst Mays adroitly stuck some miniature silk flags of the respective nations, as the tune was reached by Hunter, into the stage floor, much as one throws darts.

Shadow Effects, Etc.

I recall having seen, somewhere or other, a composition for the banjo entitled "Shadow Dance." Shadow effects with the banjo carried out by illuminating the vellum from behind (between the perch and the parchment). Electric lamps suitable for this have been advertised by American makers. I myself have used a thick piece of cellophane as a base, on which were mounted the desired figures (black or coloured) and some of which were working models. Old banjos can be used effectively for this by cutting away part of the perch.

Merely spectacular also are compositions, generally only a few bars, where the music can be turned upside down and yet reads the same. Such "pieces" need to be written or drawn in very large type on stiff cards so that they can be reversed in full view of the audience.

The Slide, the Tap and the Rasp.

Some solos incorporate a liberal use of "the slide," tapping on the head, bridge rasps, etc.

Early instances of this are: "Chinese Patrol" (Cammeyer), "Dickey Dance" (G. L. Lansing), "Sprig of Shillelagh" (Morley), "Wayfarer's Waltz" (Stewart), "Banjo Oddity" (Morley). In the last-mentioned solo there is a drum tap in the 4th and other similar bars. The bars in some parts strongly resemble the

melody of "The Three Blind Mice," so that, at least in one part, the drum tap may well represent the sound made by the fall of the door of a mouse trap! Which was what Morley probably intended.

The drum tap, by the way, can be done in three ways:—

1, with the side of the thumb for "*p*";

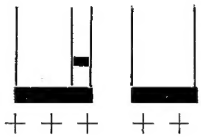
2, with the finger nails for "*mf*";

and

3, with a strong snap or flick of the forefinger off the ball of the thumb for "*ff*."

In Lansing's "Dickey Dance" the second banjoist also does the drum tap.

With regard to the third bar of the second movement in "Sounds from Africa" (Patrol), arr. by A. H. N. Kennedy, the arranger stars a certain bar and states, "Drum this bar on the vellum thus



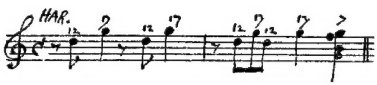
ad lib., instead of playing the notes," otherwise the solo does not incorporate imitations of animal noises as might be supposed from the title.

In his famous "Wayfarer's Waltz" S. S. Stewart made considerable use of what is known as "the slide." This particular solo is best rendered on a very responsive instrument. Incidentally, one of the tests to apply to a banjo is, does it respond *clearly* when the second left hand finger is quickly run down the first string from the 2nd fret down to the vellum in the form of a prolonged slide.

Animal Noises.

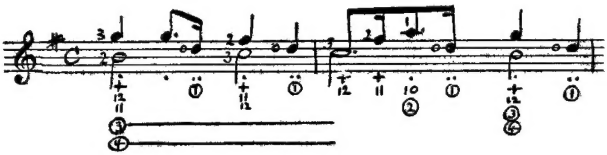
Animal noises, imitated on various musical instruments, have been introduced by many composers in their works, for example, the reiterated "donkey bray" phrase in Mendelssohn's "Overture to Midsummer Night's Dream."

Ellis, in his composition, "Down in Louisiana"—a descriptive plantation sketch—gives the following synopsis: "Sunrise," "Bird Call," "Piccaninnies Singing," "Darkies Going to Work," "Song and Dance," "Old Joe's Eccentric Dance," "Lazy Nigger" (a siesta), "Tea Time" and "Going Home with Dinah" (cake walk). The "Bird Call" was indicated as follows:—



Morley, in his well-known "Tutor," included a piece that incorporated special use of the inside strings. It was entitled "The Dancing Bear." He wrote: "This piece ('The Dancing Bear') comes to my mind as many years ago I used to see a

man with a performing bear in the streets. The man used to play a tune similar to this on a reed instrument and the bear used to dance. The bear would lie down where the *rallentandos* are marked and commence dancing again where *a tempo* is marked and then pretend to die at the end of the piece.



In " Donkey Laugh " we have the skilful application of sliding, and in " the buzz " an exemplification of *scordatura*.

[The word *scordato* is from the Italian *scordare*, " to be out of tune," " put out of tune "; (c.f. *discordare* = discord).]

Many who know the solo, " Donkey Laugh," will also know the bass string is, in one bar, not used to produce a *normal* note but is pushed over the side of the finger-board in order to enable the player to make " the buzz." This solo not only includes application of the side, the buzz and the tap, but the up and down rasp and the *duplicated* octave string note in one of the chords.

The donkey's bray is imitated in certain bars, whilst Morley also made a further appeal to the eye towards the end of the solo by his comical up and down wave of the R.H. (as if beating the empty air).

CONCLUSION.

To conclude this brief sketch, these notes are not intended as a complete survey of " trick playing " on the banjo, but they cover a good deal of ground, and it only remains for me to say that, in my opinion, " trick playing " should only be resorted to when the performer feels there is an urgent necessity to depart from straight playing, either because of a surfeit of ordinary banjo solos on the programme, or because the audience is of such a type that the inconsequential in music is more likely to appeal to them than any amount of musical ability as displayed by the fireworks of so-called " banjo kings." By all means, when required, play " trick banjo " solos on your ordinary banjo, but do not play tricks with your ordinary banjo solos.

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